

# The Oregon-California Trails

William C. Watson

**T**hank you for the opportunity to represent the Oregon-California Trails Association (OCTA) and to talk with you about the newest National Historic Trails. But first, I want to tell you a little about OCTA, which was founded in 1982, and now has 3,100 members. Last August, 600 attended our 10th annual convention in Rock Springs, WY. OCTA publishes *News From the Plains*, a quarterly newsletter about our activities, and the *Overland Journal* a magazine of scholarly trail history, issued four times a year.

My wife and I work as a team. Jeanne and I are charter and life members as well as officers of OCTA. Six years ago we organized and still co-chair OCTA's 20-member legislative committee. Our goal of obtaining National Historic Trail designation for the California and Pony Express trails was achieved when a Senate deadlock was finally broken and President Bush signed it into law on August 3, 1992. The OCTA membership strongly supported our committee. Each of the four times we asked for their help, 350-500 calls and letters arrived in Washington.

Two weeks each summer our family and friends work together to maintain and mark the top 2 1/2 miles of the Carson branch of the California trail under the Forest Service "Adopt-A-Trail" volunteer program. We recruited Kirkwood ski resort homeowners to adopt the eastern adjoining segment. On the west, for 10 miles the trail is open for vehicles and hikers. A 4-wheel drive club has adopted that segment.

The National Trails Act, passed in 1968, covered Scenic Trails like the Appalachian and the Pacific Crest trails. Scenic Trails can condemn land to establish a continuous protected viewscape for outdoor recreation. America's first National Trails Day on June 5, 1993, will mark the 25th anniversary of the National Trails Act.

In 1978, the National Trails Act was modified to include National Historic Trails, recognizing prominent routes of exploration, migration and military action. The Oregon Trail and Mormon Pioneer Trail were among the first to be designated as National Historic Trails. Historic trails cannot condemn private land and therefore are not end-to-end hiking trails. Frequently, the trail corridor is the approximate width of a covered wagon—about 4-6' feet wide. Markers are placed along nearby roads or highways to connect actual trail segments. This historic transportation corridor consists of:

**Oregon NHT**—2,200 miles from Independence, MO, to Oregon City, OR (near Portland); opened in the mid-1830s; 1993 marks the 150th anniversary of the main migration to Oregon; 300 miles of ruts remain and 125 historic sites have been identified.

**Mormon Pioneer NHT**—1,300 miles from Nauvoo, IL, via Council Bluffs, IA, to Salt Lake, UT; opened in 1846-47, 43,000 emigrants followed it; currently marked as a 1,600-mile highway trail.

**Pony Express NHT**—1,900 miles from St. Joseph, MO, to Sacramento, CA; used from 1860-1861.

**California NHT**—5,700 miles beginning in Independence, Missouri as well as at St. Joseph, MO, and Omaha, NE; includes all alternate routes in the midwest and the far west—Carson, Truckee/Donner, and Lassen routes plus Applegate-Lassen southern route to Oregon.

By handshake agreements, the National Pony Express Association annually reride the trail with over 90% of it on the actual route. OCTA and the NPEA were legislative partners for six years. We walked the House and Senate halls together, talking to aides and jointly testified several times in favor of the legislation.

For OCTA members, the California Trail starts at the National Frontier Trails Center in Independence, MO. The Pioneer Woman's statue was a local idea funded by contributions. In the rear is the 20x40 two-story OCTA headquarters furnished to us by the city. This is the home of our COED (Census of Overland Emigrant Documents) database of 900 emigrant records surveyed by our members. Also, it is the home of OCTA's Merrill Mattes Library of 2,000 trail research volumes and of the Paden Collection, consisting of 100 artifacts collected in the 1930s from private landowners.

Independence was the jumping-off place for a number of wagon trains but many left from other Missouri river towns. Upon reaching the Missouri River, frequently they waited days for ferries to take them across.

In Kansas at the crossing of Red Vermillion river still stands the Vieux Elm, the largest in the U.S., and named for a Potawatamie Indian chief. On private land in western Kansas and open for special occasions is Alcove Springs. The owner was given our Friend of the Trail award for preserving this site.

Most diaries mention fierce storms in the Platte River valley and how wet they got enroute to Ash Hollow, now a Nebraska state park. Here, most emigrants locked the wheels and skidded their wagons down the steep slope while women and children walked.

Two of the most famous landmarks of the Overland trails were Court House Rock, another famous Nebraska site commented about in emigrant diaries, and Chimney Rock. When wagon trains camped for the night many emigrants walked several miles to climb Chimney Rock and carve their names. Funds are now being raised to build a non-profit interpretive center here.

At Scott's Bluff in Nebraska, now operated by the NPS, the wagons are replicas, part of the interpretation center for the overland trails. Paintings and diaries reveal that the story of the lone covered wagon is a Hollywood myth.

At Fort Laramie most wagon trains stopped for mail, trail information and supplies. This Wyoming site is now operated by the NPS. Here, the Sioux Indians often camped, trading with the emigrants. The OCTA Census of Emigrant Documents records many Indian contacts and almost all were favorable.

Register Cliff was another famous Wyoming landmark, where emigrants left their names. L.N. Breed was just one of the many emigrants who did so in 1853.

The Guernsey Ruts in Wyoming are the finest along the entire trail. Another important site was the Reshaw bridge over the North Platte River near Casper,

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Wyoming. This replica was built by a local historical society.

But the most important landmark of the entire trail was Independence Rock, a popular camping spot for the wagon trains. There are numerous reports of July 4th celebrations being held here. The view from the top of Independence Rock shows the Sweetwater River as it flows east from South Pass. Equally impressive was Devil's Gap, on private land in Wyoming. The Sun Ranch has received an OCTA Friend Of the Trail award for preservation efforts here. At South Pass, crossed by every wagon headed west, the 1906 Oregon Trail marker was erected by Ezra Meeker when he retraced the trail in reverse. It is on private land and the Hay brothers received a Friend Of the Trail award last August for preservation of this site.

A second marker at South Pass honors Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding, mid-1830s missionary wives and the first white women to cross the Rockies. Nearby is Pacific Springs, the first point after South Pass where the water flows west. It is also on private land. A few miles further west is the Charlotte Danzie Grave, preserved by descendants but marked with an OCTA interpretive sign.

Fort Bridger on Black's fork of Green River is another NPS site. A few miles away is the Daniel Lantz grave with protective pole fence and interpretive sign installed by OCTA's Graves and Sites Committee.

In Utah, Emigration Canyon was opened by the Donner party in 1846, as this company attempted to follow the route later known as the Hastings Cut-off. It was used by the Mormons in 1847 to reach Salt Lake. City of Rocks in Idaho is another spectacular site. These are Steeple Rocks. OCTA worked with the BLM to have this area designated a National Reserve. The California Trail from Salt Lake rejoins the Fort Hall trail in City of Rocks.

The Humboldt Sink and the Forty Mile Desert in Nevada presented a major obstacle for emigrants. At this point those taking the Truckee-Donner route went to the right. OCTA worked closely with Rick Burns while he produced the Donner Party documentary shown on PBS. Wagons taking the Carson Route took the left-hand fork across the desert.

The Carson Canyon on the Nevada-California border is part of Forest Service land. The trail crossed the Carson River three times in this rugged canyon before reaching Hope Valley. Thanks to cooperative cattle ranchers and former Congressman Norman Shumway this beautiful and historic valley is now a National Reserve administered by the Forest Service.

At Red Lake the trail begins the first ascent of the Sierra Nevada mountains. The trail here is partly on private land as well as on Forest Service land. Most emigrants camped at the lake to rest up for the climb. A cobbled wagon road was paved with small stones by emigrants to make it easier to follow the trail up the Devil's Ladder. Contents of each wagon plus the canvas top were hauled up on the backs of the animals. Then the empty wagon was double-teamed to pull it up the mountain. Pioneers also used rocks to build up the down-hill side of the wagon road.

The first summit for the pioneers was the Carson Pass, today the summit of Highway 88. A Forest Service interpretive center, being built here by volunteers, is to be dedicated on National Trails Day, June 5, 1993.

Caples Lake in pioneer times was a grassy valley with two streams running through it at the base of the second summit. Most wagon trains camped overnight in the meadow. After the brush had been cleared on our adopted segment of the trail, ruts were clearly visible while more ruts still exist along the final climb to Covered Wagon Summit, the gateway to California.

West Pass, at 9,600' elevation, is the highest point in the U.S. that the covered wagons rolled. The rail marker was erected in 1970 by the Nevada Historical Society and is now maintained by a private trail group. From West Pass the dirt road, on top of the old emigrant trail, is now maintained by a wheel drive club.

Identifying, marking and preserving the emigrant trails involves many people and many different organizations, both public and private. For many of us it is a labor of love and I have enjoyed taking you on this armchair trip by covered wagon over our Historic Transportation Corridor to California.

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William C. Watson is past president of the Oregon-California Trails Association.

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tial amount of research is completed, then one can begin the evaluation of resources along the corridor.

A body of literature does exist to aid in evaluation. In particular, the National Register of Historic Places has very helpful staff and publications to give insight, advice, and opinion about this. Likewise, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the State Historic Preservation Officer provide assistance on evaluation of sites. HABS/HAER provides information through staff and publications which assist in evaluation.

The National Trails Act of 1968, as amended in 1978 to include historic trails, supplements criteria for evaluation too. In sum, there are many sources of criteria useful in evaluating a transportation corridor and individual sites and historic resources along it.

Finally, data gathering through research should not be given short shrift. It is fundamental in order to establish overall historic significance, and for completing an inventory and evaluation of the corridor. The traveling public now and in the future will be the better informed for it.

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Dr. Jere Krakow is a historian with the Denver Service Center, National Park Service.